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ABSTRACT

The importance of metalinguistic awareness in early language learning and reading is stressed. It is reported that a number of studies support the contention that many children beginning first grade do not segment language into conventional words in either the auditory or the visual mode. Thus, it is suggested, instructional demands are often beyond the metalinguistic awareness of children. Suggestions are offered for helping children to develop these skills. (Author/SS)

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Metalinguistics and Early Schooling

by Susan Partridge

Prior to going to school, the little child knows the language of his home, his neighborhood, the language of the TV shows he watches, the language of the books which, hopefully, are read to him, and the language of his friends and relatives. This, in itself, presents a wide range in language ability and concept development, as each child is unique, and no two homes are exactly alike. The gap is further widened because, unfortunately, there are some children who know only the language of the streets, and for whom even the language of other children seems foreign.

School, for a number of children, is their first encounter with what might be referred to as formal language. Early instructional material contains vocabulary such as letter, sound, word, sentence, period, question mark, number, etc. Are we sure that all children fully understand the meaning of these words? We know that the vocabulary and the concepts in the instructional material are beyond some of them. In other words, the instructional demands are well beyond the metalinguistic awareness of these children.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines metalinguistics thus: "a branch of linguistics that deals with the relation of language to the rest of culture-determined behavior."

Dictionary of Linguistics, by Mario Pei and Frank Gaynor

defines metalinguistics in this manner: "The study of what people talk (or write) about and why, and how they react to it (Trager and Smith); it covers those aspects of linguistics which deal with the relation of language to the rest of culture." The fact that there are now subcultures within a culture further compounds the problem of metalinguistic awareness.

Definitions of words found in early instructional material indicate that the task of teaching the vocabulary and the concepts is not an easy one, nor is it easy for all children to accomplish, no matter how efficient the teaching.

The International Visual Dictionary describes a word in this manner: "A word is a group of letters that gives us an idea." Does t-h-e give a little child an idea, or is it "the dog," "the horse," etc. that does this? Tests have revealed that some children think of "the dog" as one word. A young professional confessed that, as a young child, he thought "Puerto Rico" was one word. When he read it, it came out "Puertorico Rico."

The Thorndike Barnhart Beginning Dictionary defines a sentence as a "group of words that expresses a complete thought." A very young child, upon seeing an adult with some candy, cries out, "Me!" Actually, he means, "Give me some!" "Boys and girls!" might well be taken by children to mean, "Boys and girls, be quiet!" It might also be taken to mean, "See the boys and girls!" Grown-ups often say, "Not bad!," meaning, "That's not bad!"

A definition of "number," also found in the Thorndike Barnhart Beginning Dictionary, reads: "word that tells exactly how many. Two, thirteen, twenty-one, fifty, and one hundred are numbers." Is a word a number? Is a number a word? It may well be that there are some children for whom these words are interchangeable.

In Webster's National Dictionary of the English Language, the period was defined and/or referred to as a dot, or full point. This writer recalls hearing periods called "stops." This name, though not commonly used in our culture, indicates that the person may have had some understanding of the meaning of the word.

In addition to instructional materials, little children may have access to a classroom library, a school library, and a public library. The Children's Department in each of several libraries in the suburbs of New York City was visited. Though many middle-class families live in these suburbs, there are some less fortunate. In the libraries visited, the children from the "other side of the tracks" were conspicuous by their absence. When this fact was pointed out, the librarians were in agreement. As a matter of fact, one librarian said, "The "kids" who come here are sophisticated readers."

Even before they go to school, many young children have the opportunity to acquire a very sophisticated vocabulary. For example, the April 1979 issue of Sesame Street Magazine refers to a small can opener, operated by turning its key-like

part by hand, as a machine, and this position is defended. Several adults were selected at random and asked under what classification they would put this type of can opener. Not one said machines.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary describes a can opener as "a devices for opening cans." The Random House Dictionary of the English Language describes it as "a utensil, device, or appliance for opening cans."

Other machines referred to in the same issue of Sesame Street Magazine were the stove, the refrigerator, the clock, and the toaster. In large stores, the stove and the refrigerator usually come under major appliances, and the clock and the toaster are considered small appliances.

One definition of a machine found in Thorndike Barnhart Beginning Dictionary reads "a device for applying power or changing its direction. Levers and pulleys are simple machines." It is interesting to note that despite the fact that this definition appears in a beginning dictionary, the classification of a can opener as a machine has never been thought of by many.

Teachers are aware of the lack of metalinguistic awareness on the part of some students. For example, the written work of some high school students shows that they do not understand what a sentence is, though this concept should have been firmly established years earlier. This, then, emphasizes the importance of a good beginning - a strong foundation.

Researchers have done some work in the area of metalinguistic

awareness. Marjorie Holden and Water MacGinitie made a study of children's conceptions of word boundaries in speech and print. In a write-up of their study, they made brief mention of other researchers who had studied children's awareness of lexical units. Among those mentioned were Karpova (1955), Clay (1966), Chappell (1968), and Hochberg (1970).

In his study of Russian preschoolers, Karpova found that these children generally could not divide a sentence into its lexical units.

Clay, in her study of 100 New Zealand children who were just beginning school, found that, in general, beginning readers do not understand conventional word boundaries.

Chappell (1968) considered age, sex, and socioeconomic status in her study, and found a significant difference between different socioeconomic levels.

Hochberg's report of a study by Hochberg, Levin and Frail, indicated that the spaces between words, apparently, were not helpful to beginning readers in identifying meaningful units. In the study, the white spaces between words had been filled with a meaningless symbol.

After briefly reviewing the work of several researchers, Holden and MacGinitie explained their study. They stated the purpose of undertaking the study in this manner:

"The aim of the present study was to extend previous findings in two different areas. First, we attempted to study children's conception of word boundaries in speech, using a greater variety of utterance types than had

previously been used. Second, we attempted to investigate the degree of correspondence between children's conceptions of oral and written word boundaries."

They had as their subjects eighty-four kindergarten children, thirty-seven girls and forty-seven boys. The children were interviewed near the end of the school year. Each child was given a number of phrases or short sentences to segment into words. As the child repeated an utterance, he tapped a poker chip for each word.

Fifty-seven of the children were taught to identify word boundaries in print. Following this, they were tested for their ability to identify a line of print that contained the same number of words that a given utterance contained.

Holden and MacGinitie concluded that there are many children finishing kindergarten, who are unfamiliar with printed conventions, and they expressed a need for further studies as to the value to beginning readers of some specific instruction in segmentation and printing conventions.

To determine the meaning that sixty-eight Spanish-speaking children, ranging in age from four to six, attached to the segmentation of a written sentence, Emilia Ferreiro classified their responses into six developmentally ordered categories, only the last one of which showed that spoken utterance had a written counterpart. Dr. Ferreiro, apparently, is pursuing further research aimed at a deeper understanding of this developmental process.

It would seem that testing in the area of metalinguistics

leaves something to be desired. For example, Holden and MacGinitie pointed out that linguists do not always agree as to what a word is. They add, therefore, that a child might segment an utterance differently from standard print because of "idiosyncratic, linguistic or developmental reasons." They mentioned, too, that a child's sensitivity to the rhythmic aspects of an utterance might influence the way he segments it.

In Fun with Words, by Richard Scarry, the words are not defined as they are in a dictionary; they are used in context, and there is an accompanying picture. In explaining what a word (singular) is, there is a picture of a mother hen near her chicks who are in a playpen. The explanation is, "Little chicks first words (plural) were 'Bow Wow'!" The Rainbow Dictionary gives this word as "Bow-wow." In still another dictionary*, it is found as "bowwow."

A children's librarian reported that the children who visit his department are very enthusiastic about Fun with Words, but he also reported that they are "sophisticated readers" and that most of them are from middle to upper-middle class families.

It is felt that many teachers are aware that some of their children lack a metalinguistic awareness. It is further felt that their big concern is how to help the children. Some suggestions are offered below.

*Webster's National Dictionary of the English Language

Holden and MacGinitie's teaching of the printing convention seems practical. It involved presenting the idea that a word is composed of a number of letters. For this, they used the child's name as an example, and showed him that though he spoke his name, John Jones, without an extended pause between his first and last name, it was printed with a visible space between the two names.

Because each child is unique, it is felt that the language experience approach might be useful in establishing a metalinguistic awareness. Fortunately, there is considerable available material on this approach. It has been suggested by some proponents of individualized reading that the child, at first, be allowed to dictate his stories using his own language, and later be shown the conventional way. Obviously, this is extremely important when a young child is making a transition from one culture to another.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner has said, "It's not beauty to abruptly halt the growth of a young mind and to overlay it with the frame of an imposed culture." About "firsts," she has said, "First words must have an intense meaing. First words must already be part of a dynamic life. First books must be made of the stuff of the child himself, whatever and wherever the child." She adds that in taking original writing as a basis for reading, attention is given to punctuation and to capitalization, and to handwriting as well, because children read each other's stories. She makes it clear that this "organic reading" is a lead up to all

other reading; the movement is from the known to the unknown.

The language experience approach should help to avoid the confusion between letters and words experienced by some children. Holden and MacGinitie suggested that an over-emphasis on phonics might be responsible for this confusion. The language experience approach might also be helpful in overcoming another misunderstanding noted in testing, that is, the combining of the word, the, with the noun following it to form one word - "thedog," for example.

Teacher's verbal behavior, if carefully thought out and exercised can be a help too.. For example, in some cases, it might be better for the teacher to frame the word concerned rather than to have the child find "the first word in the second sentence."

Camille L. Z. Blachowicz has suggested that, in playing "slot slipping" games with sentence frames, words that children fail to separate from content words be filled in in advance. The word, the, is an example of such a word.

In any case, if the uniqueness of each child is kept in mind as teaching plans are made and executed, the meta-linguistic awareness of little children should keep pace with their instructional demands.

Conclusions

1. A number of studies support the contention that many children, beginning first grade, do not segment language into conventional words in either the auditory or the visual mode.
2. Instructional demands are often beyond the metalinguistic awareness of children. In this fact lie many implications for teachers, publishers, and researchers.
3. The power of words is limitless. Children should not be restricted to the vocabulary of a given text. Each child should be encouraged and guided in the development of a vocabulary in keeping with his uniqueness.

Implications

1. Teachers must be aware of the demands that materials make on children. This applies also to the demands of their teaching methods and to their verbal behavior.
2. The beginning years of a child's school life are crucial, and require teachers' careful consideration of his uniqueness as they help him to develop.
3. Individualized help is indicated in the broad range between the "advantaged" and the "disadvantaged." For example, this paper stated several categories for classifying a can opener. The range of knowledge between the child who has had many educational opportunities and his impoverished counterpart, who may know a can opener only as "a thing," is great.
4. Testing for metalinguistic awareness seems to leave something to be desired.
5. There should be better communication among teachers, publishers, and researchers.
6. More research is needed in the area of metalinguistic awareness as it relates to early schooling.

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